



backstreets

As we embrace the opportunity to venture into the world again, perhaps we should travel with less purpose? In Zanzibar, **Sue Watt** reflects on the joy of the slow and aimless meander →

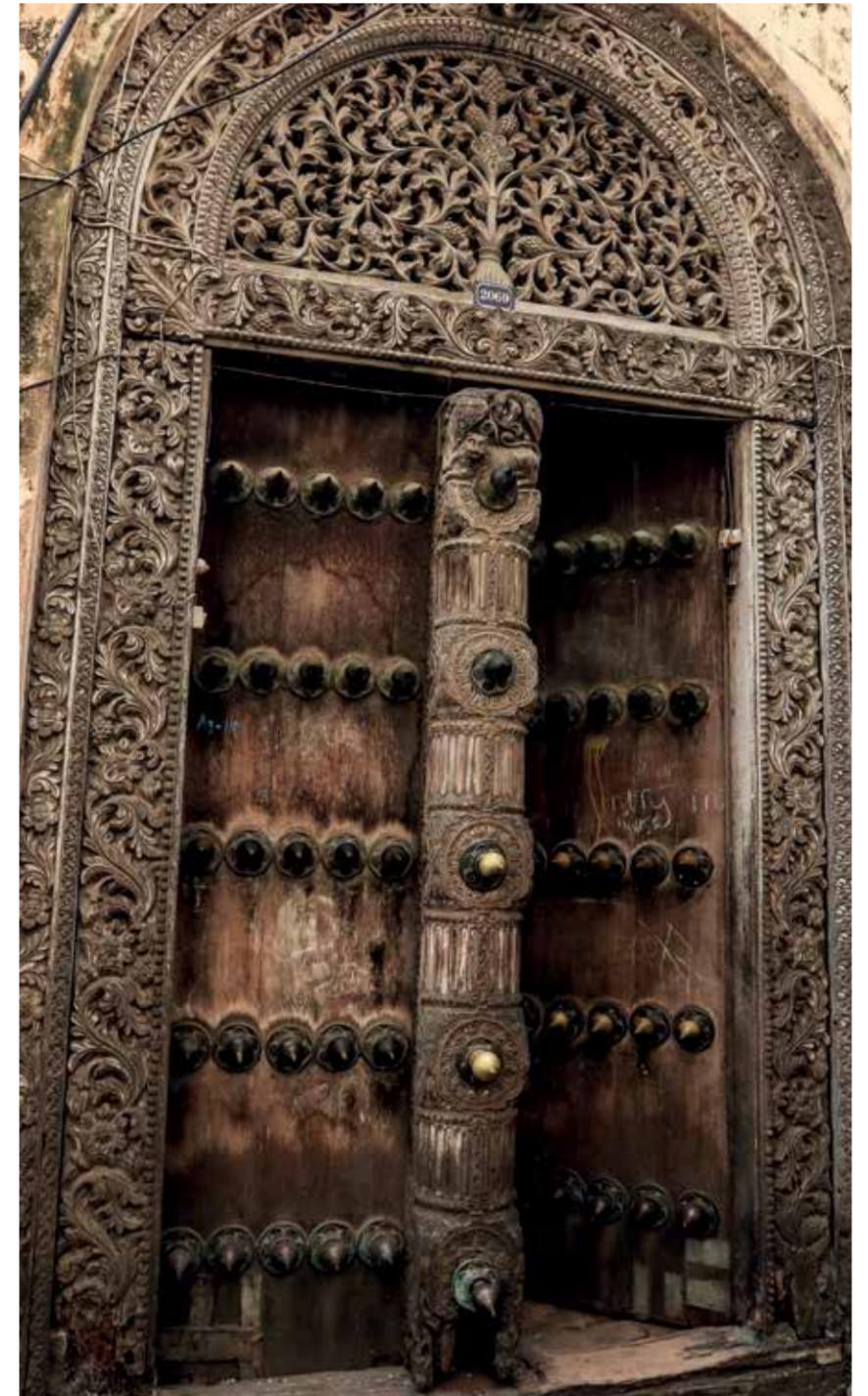
musa Juma smiled knowingly when I told him I'd got hopelessly lost walking around Stone Town's labyrinth of alleyways, where centuries-old mildewed houses meld effortlessly with the mayhem of modern life. "I came here to Zanzibar from Pemba Island 25 years ago, and I still get lost!" my driver replied. "These narrow streets often look the same."

Stone Town's former prosperity was borne of the tyranny of the Arab slave trade and the lucrative spices which gave the Zanzibar archipelago its moniker of The Spice Islands. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, some parts of town have been carefully restored; others are slowly crumbling, eroding through neglect, humidity and the inexorable passage of time.

Wandering along these backstreets steeped in history, I became captivated by the tall houses with elegant, latticed balconies and the carvings full of symbolism on heavy wooden doors - reflections of the Indian Ocean island's colonial past. Lions or crowns represented Omani royalty; ornate chains signified the homes of slave-masters, and rows of brass studs replicated Indian homes, originally intended to protect against marauding elephants. Some doors were polished and shiny, some were cracked, dusty and dry.

I tried to imagine what went on behind those doors, how life might have been in Stone Town's heyday for both the powerful and the poor. Distracted by my musings, I ended up disoriented, lost deep within its maze. Local Zanzibaris walked by, but there were few tourists where I wandered. Children's high-pitched voices drifted from classrooms, sometimes laughing, sometimes reciting Swahili words I didn't understand. Men sold fruits and household goods on bicycles, or rode noisy motorbikes down streets so narrow they could barely fit. They waved a 'thank-you' when I stood in doorways as they passed.

Women in hijabs strolled together, →



chatting or calling in to small, unpretentious shops selling neatly folded fabrics or jewellery and gold chains twinkling in the windows. And the muezzin's call to prayer echoed through the heat and humidity down the alleyways of their ancient neighbourhood.

This is a place where it's good to get lost, I realised; where you should just drift aimlessly and see where the streets take you, soaking up its soul in these scenes of daily life.

Eventually I found myself back in the more familiar touristy streets around Shangani. But it wasn't as frenetic as the Stone Town I'd seen on previous visits. Some visitors ambled around souvenir shops and chilled in its juice bars and cafés, but in late February last year, the Covid pandemic was beginning to take hold around the world. Travellers were staying away, and Zanzibar was already feeling the effects.

In the streets, hawkers were selling their way-too-sweet sugar cane juice, cheap sunglasses and spices of dubious quality. Stall-holders still displayed their wood carvings and bright *kangas*, and artists hung their Tingatinga paintings of cartoon-like wildlife, Maasai warriors and dhows at sunset on old buildings. But everyone seemed somehow subdued.

"We normally have many more tourists and cruise ships. People are worried," Khamis Juma confirmed the following morning. He was my guide on a walking tour of Stone Town, revealing its past and present through its palaces, museums and markets.

We started at the huge Old Fort, built 300 years ago when Oman conquered Zanzibar. I walked along turreted ramparts that dominate the shoreline, looking across to the shimmering ocean, peeping inside artists' studios in the towers and down onto craft stalls below. Nearby, Beit al Ajaib, with its wide verandahs, iron columns and clocktower, was shrouded in scaffolding for renovations. "It's called The House of Wonders because it was the first house in Zanzibar to have electricity and an elevator. They say it'll take two years to complete the work," Khamis explained.*

In the Palace Museum – once the Sultan's home – we wandered through rooms with eclectic exhibits ranging from ebony thrones to Formica furniture, from

This is a place where it's good to get lost, I realised; where you should just drift aimlessly and see where the streets take you, soaking up its soul in these scenes of daily life

Murano glass to a Gatling gun. But the Old Dispensary won my vote for the most beautiful building, with its ornate blue balconies and vivid stained-glass windows true to Indian style.

Opposite Zanzibar's port, we passed a huge banyan called The Big Tree, its dense crown offering shady respite from the clammy midday sun to men in crisp white *kanzus*, to traders, boatmen and taxi drivers. "It's like a Muslim version of your pubs," Khamis said. "We drink coffee, sit around telling stories and chat about politics and life..." In contrast, Mercury's Bar across the road, named after Zanzibar's best-known son, had Queen songs blaring from speakers and wannabe Freddie lookalikes in tight white vests drinking beer.

Zanzibar's lack of tourists went unnoticed in the manic Darajani Market, a former Arab souk where the locals shop. We walked around stalls selling

Right, clockwise from top: Vendors set out their stalls in the hope of grabbing some passing trade; The Old Dispensary; the sculpture of five slaves in the garden of the Anglican Cathedral; locals play football on the beach near Kelele Square; the Old Fort



zanzibar timeline

1498 Vasco da Gama becomes the first European to reach the East African coast
Early 16th century A Portuguese trading station is established on the site of Zanzibar Town | **1840** Capital of the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman relocated to Zanzibar
1890 Zanzibar becomes a British Protectorate | **1897** Slavery abolished in Zanzibar
1963 Independence from Britain | **1964** Zanzibar Revolution; Sultanate of Zanzibar becomes part of the new United Republic of Tanzania

everything from meat and fish to fruit and flip flops, with aromas of spices and oranges from juice carts mingling with the stench of live chickens, all to a soundtrack of traders shouting and machetes chopping up goat carcasses.

Our final stop was the imposing Anglican Cathedral, built on the site of the former slave market. In the garden stands a poignant sculpture of five slaves

in a sunken pit, wearing genuine slave chains. Their look of dignity and despair moved me to tears. The nearby East African Slave Trade Exhibit paid sensitive respect to those who so cruelly lost their freedom and their lives; a painful vestige of Zanzibar's prosperous past.

Later, I walked around Forodhani Gardens, where cannons and pavement cafés look out to sea. Local boys showed

off their skills diving or belly-flopping into the water, while chefs prepared their stalls for Stone Town's renowned streetfood market. I complimented Mr Happy, wearing full whites and chef's hat, on his impressive display of seafood kebabs, lobster, meats, fruit and felafel. "I've been here 30 years and still love what I do," he said, smiling broadly.

On my last evening, I went to my →



favourite sundowner spot in Stone Town, a small low-key bar called Travellers' Café tucked away in a backstreet overlooking the beach near Kelele Square's smart hotels. Every evening, runners trained on a makeshift track drawn on the sand and guys played football, randomly joining teams on an imaginary pitch, chasing the ball into the waves.

With ice-cold beer in hand, I watched as people turned to silhouettes in the fading light and dhows sailed out or drifted back home, as they had done for centuries. I wished I could slow this moment down and just stay a while longer, watching the Zanzibar sunset. 🌅

The author travelled with Cox & Kings and was hosted at Jafferjee House and Zanzibar Serena Hotel

**Footnote: In December 2020, as refurbishment neared completion, part of the House of Wonder collapsed, killing two people. The Sultanate of Oman remains committed to completing its rebuild.*

beyond stone town

Zanzibar is one of Africa's most appealing destinations for people wanting a taste of Swahili coastal life. Most visitors spend many days or weeks here at the beginning or end of a safari to Tanzania's many wildlife reserves, and it's easy to understand why. In addition to Stone Town, there is a smorgasbord of attractions and activities to see and do...

Beaches

Think Zanzibar, think beach. Turquoise waters lap at palm tree-lined white-sand beaches, with the main island of Unguja's east and northern coasts offering the proverbial 'tropical island paradise'. With several coral reefs, abundant sea life and the odd wreck or two, divers and snorkellers are well rewarded. Here are a few examples...

Bwejuu: considered one of Zanzibar's best, in the quieter southeast. Ideal for those seeking total relaxation and privacy.

Nungwi: with a renowned reef, Nungwi is perfect for divers and snorkellers. It's known for its stunning sunsets and night-time entertainment.

Matamwe: the pristine sands of Zanzibar's longest beach give way to traditional fishing villages and, offshore, you'll find the renowned diving spot of Mnemba Atoll.

Paje: Known for its watersports, in particular kitesurfing. A lively party spot in the evenings.

Spice tours

A guided tour of Zanzibar's shambas (spice farms) is not to be missed. See, touch, smell and taste your way around, sampling the likes of cinnamon, turmeric, clove, vanilla, nutmeg, chilli and lemongrass, as well as fresh fruits such as coconut, papaya and jackfruit.

Dhow trips

From a sunset cruise to day trips and longer to other islands within the archipelago, a dhow trip is another must-do. Try a day excursion to Chumbe, better known as Prison Island, which gets its name from a never officially used gaol. It's now a sanctuary for giant tortoises, some pushing 200 years old.

Conservation

Visit the award-winning Chumbe Island Coral Park, recognised for its forward-minded conservation and environmental-education initiatives as long ago as 2011, when it became the first Global Ecosphere Retreat.

Wildlife Conservation Society Tanzania recently announced a project to form a new reserve on Unguja to preserve around 600 red colobus monkeys (pictured), whose population is in decline. Comprising high forest, coral rag and mangrove habitats, the new reserve will

also protect other threatened species, including Aders' duiker, Zanzibar dwarf galago and hawksbill and green turtles.

Jozani Forest – part of the Jozani-Chwaka National Park – provides sanctuary for around 5000 red colobus and a host of other wildlife; there's a variety of tours to the 50sq km national park readily available.

Other islands

There's more to Zanzibar than Unguja. Try the quieter and wilder Pemba for its turtle sanctuary and underwater seascapes, or Mafia, arguably one of the world's prime diving spots. There are also several private and uninhabited islands to enjoy.



TIM DAVENPORT / WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY TANZANIA